



THOMAS NAIL 2015-10-29

THE HORDES ARE BANGING ON THE GATES OF EUROPE?

GOSSE, NECROPOLITICS BARBARISM, MIGRANTS, REFUGEES

The recent increase in movement of refugees and migrants into Europe is not the cause of the current crisis – Europe is. Migration has occurred – and will continue – for all kinds of reasons, as it has since the beginning of human societies. Indeed, mass human movement is not the historical anomaly – Europe is. If the mistreatment, marginalization, and death of recent European migrants is so deplorable, it is because Europe has created a social system that has made this a reality. The subject of the crisis should be flipped right side up: Europe is a crisis for migrants. Therefore, the critical question (in the Greek sense of the word “krisis” as a decision) is not what is to be done with the migrants, but rather what is to be done with Europe?

Throughout history, migrants, refugees, and stateless people have prompted a similar critical question for civilization. In the Neolithic world it was answered by the territorial expulsion of nomadic people from agricultural communities. In the Ancient world it was answered by the political expulsion of barbarians in the form of slavery. In the Medieval world it was answered by the criminalization of vagabonds by the feudal system. In the Modern world it has been answered by the economic exploitation of a migrant proletariat.

Europe's current crisis is that it is increasingly forced to choose between its pretensions of liberal democracy—based on the idea of universal equality—and the fact that its provision of those rights is absolutely limited by territorial, political, legal, and economic borders. The real crisis is that one cannot have both. Thousands of years of history have demonstrated this thesis, but the 21st century will force us to realize it. More than any other century, this will be the century of the migrant. The international nation-state system (UN) and now the infra-national nation-state system (EU) have failed to reconcile this tension. What we are witnessing today in the brutal deaths of African boat refugees and Mexican migrants is the demonstration of this failure.

If Europe, and the West more broadly, is in crisis today, it is partially due to the fact that they continue to model themselves on an historically failed political model: the Roman empire against the Barbarian tides.

In the UK, the Guardian recently published an editorial comment on Europe's crisis that ends by describing refugees as the “fearful dispossessed” who are “rattling Europe's gates.” Although unfamiliar to some, others will know that the phrase “rattling the gates” refers to a very specific historical moment: the barbarian invasion of Rome. Numerous historical and popular books, films, and news articles evidence this same rhetorical use of “barbarians at the gates.”

In the United States this same rhetoric was reanimated in popular and political discourse by Samuel Huntington in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, to explicitly describe the “Mexican immigrant invasion” of American civilization. It seems to be catching on, given the success of Donald Trump's xenophobic rhetoric about “migrant rapists and murderers,” evoking images of barbarian hordes invading America, or the way in which recent Central American child refugees to the United States were described by the media and the government as an influx of dangerous waters in the form of a “flood,” “surge,” “tidal wave,” or “deluge.”

From the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie who called the migrant peasants in Paris “savage barbarians” to the Nazi propaganda that described migrant Jews as “uncivilized oriental barbarians,” the mobilization of specific rhetoric to encourage the perceived inferiority of migrant and refugee groups continues today. In Europe, French presidential frontrunner Marine Le Pen said at a recent rally that “this migratory influx will be like the barbarian invasion of the 4th century, and the consequences will be the same.” Even when their rhetoric is veiled, sometimes even when they claim to support the migrant population, much of the rest of Europe and its media have now uncritically adopted the same “dangerous waters” metaphors used by Romans and almost every other imperial power in history who have described their migrants as “fierce waves,” “influxes,” “storms,” “surges,” and “floods.” Even the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, has described the refugees as a “great tide” that has “flooded into Europe” producing “chaos” that needs to be “stemmed and managed.” This is not neutral terminology. It has a historically specific and

explicitly negative origin.

However, seemingly unbeknownst to those who intentionally equate contemporary migrants with the “barbarian tides” of old, the popularization of this collective political idea (whether consciously or unconsciously deployed for dramatic rhetorical effect) has two interestingly opposed implications.

On the one hand, it implies an historical affirmation of Roman imperialism and slavery that has its contemporary parallel in modern nationalism and the economic exploitation of migrants in Western countries.

But it also implies a negation of the Empire and presents the historical inevitability that the Barbarians will destroy Rome, or today that global migrants, like the Goths, will no longer be able to tolerate the current conditions of exploitation and incarceration and will bring about a revolution against the Empire. This is the “critical” decision to be made today in Europe and elsewhere: to preserve the Empire or change it.

Thomas Nail is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Denver.

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